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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal research has shown that communication deficits (negative interaction) precede the development of relationship distress. To investigate the antecedents of relationship stability and adjustment 31 couples who were seriously considering marriage participated in a longitudinal study. The couples initially completed the Marital Inventories and a problem checklist for their relationship. These ratings were summed to form a problem intensity score. Behavioral measures were obtained from videotapes of the couples discussing a specific problem. The sessions were assigned positive and negative codes using the Dyadic Interaction Scoring Code. Initial behavioral measures, relationship satisfaction and consensus, and problem intensities were compared with relationship stability and adjustment after 2 and 1/2 years. At the end of this time, 25 couples were together and 6 had parted. There were no significant differences between couples who broke up and those who stayed together on positive or negative behavior. For both males and females, dyadic satisfaction at time 1 predicted dyadic adjustment at time 2. Self-reports of satisfaction were superior to behavioral measures as predictors of later relationship adjustment. Neither initial behaviors nor self-reports predicted relationship stability. (NRB)

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Antecedents of Relationship Stability and Adjustment: A 2-1/2 Year Follow-Up

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Antecedents of Relationship Stability and Adjustment: A 2-1/2 Year Follow-Up

Abstract

Thirty-one couples participated in a 2-1/2 year longitudinal study. Initial behavioral observations and self-reports were compared to relationship status and adjustment after 2-1/2 years. Relationship stability was not predicted. The present study found that self-reports of satisfaction were superior to behavioral measures as predictors of later ralationship adjustment.

In a longitudinal study Markman (1979; 1981) found that the positive or negative ratings of how partner messages were received significantly predicted relationship satisfaction for a small sample of couples at both 2-1/2 and 5-1/2 years. Markman also found that the levels of problems the couples faced and Locke Marital Relationship Inventory scores at Time 1 predicted relationship distress at 1 year, but they did not predict relationship distress at at 2-1/2 years or at 5-1/2 years. These findings provided support for the notion that communication deficits (negative interaction) precede the development of relationship distress and were taken as support for a behavioral conceptualization of marital distress.

Markman based his analyses on those couples who remained together for the full length of the study. He did not compare those individuals who dissolved their relationship with those who stayed together, nor did he use observer recorded data. In a later work, Markman (in press) suggested that both adjustment and stability should be studied. A comparison between terminated and intact couples on actual relationship behavior as seen by an outside

observer is essential to understanding relationship distress. The present study was designed to investigate the antecedents of relationship stability and adjustment. Initial behavioral measures, relationship satisfaction and consensus, and problem intensities were compared with relationship stability and adjustment after a period of 2-1/2 years.

Methods

The subject pool consisted of thirty-one couples who responded to newspaper advertisements for couples seriously considering marriage. Formal engagement was not used as a criterion because many couples marry without going through a formal engagement. At initial contact the males and the females averaged 25.2 and 24.3 years of age, respectively. They had been together for an average of 2.3 years.

In the initial data collection the couples, completed the Marital Inventories (Holman, Burr, & Brown, 1980) and a problem checklist for their relationship. Contained within the Marital Inventories were two sets of items, dyadic consensus and dyadic satisfaction. These scales are similar to subscales in the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale. The checklist consisted of 30 typical problems couples face.

These ratings were summed to form a problem intensity score. The couple discussed a specific problem that both of them had indicated as being a medium problem in their relationship. The couples discussed the problem for 15 minutes.

Videotapes of the sessions were later coded by four trained observers who worked in pairs using the Dyadic Interaction Scoring Code (DISC; Filsinger, 1981; 1983). The data were collected as positive and negative codes. The coders were trained to and maintained a level of 70% effective percentage agreement (Jensen, 1959). Intercoder correlations of .83 and .93 for the positive and .96 and .97 for the negative behaviors were obtained for the males and females respectively.

After 2-1/2 years the couples were contacted again by mail and asked to indicate the status of their relationship. All 31 couples were tracked for either being together (n=25) or having broken up (n=6). The respondents who remained together also were asked to complete the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976; Spanier & Filsinger, 1983).

Results

A repeated measures ANOVA with sex and

coder as repeated measures was used to analyze the positive and negative behaviors. There were no significant differences between the couples who had broken up and those who had stayed together on either positives or negatives. Neither were there within-couple differences for male versus female behavioral rates. No significant effect was related to coder.

The predictive power of initial problem intensity, dyadic consensus, or dyadic satisfaction was analyzed via *t*-test comparisons of the means of those subjects who were together versus those who were not. Again there were no significant differences between the two groups for either male or female responses.

In keeping with the model of analysis used by Markman (1979; 1981) for relationship adjustment, Pearson product moment correlations were calculated between initial behaviors, problem intensities, and self-reports and 2-1/2 year follow-up self-reports of dyadic adjustment. While the behaviors at Time 1 did not predict either the male or female DAS scores, the male's problem intensity scores and dyadic satisfaction scores did, *r*'s = -.48 ($p < .04$) and .65 ($p < .005$), respectively.

The females' dyadic satisfaction scores were also predictive (r = .46, p < .05). In sum, for both males and females dyadic satisfaction at Time 1 predicted dyadic adjustment 2-1/2 years later.

Discussion

These results stand in contrast to the earlier reports of Markman (1979; 1981) in that self-reports faired better as predictors. It should be kept in mind that, while Markman used impact ratings of behaviors, the present study used trained observers. Perhaps what the couple feels about a message is more important than what an outsider sees. It was the self-report of dyadic satisfaction which predicted later dyadic adjustment. It is interesting to note that neither initial behaviors nor self-reports predicted relationship stability. The results, therefore, do not support a simple behaviorist theory. It would be interesting to know whether or not impact behavioral ratings predict relationship stability. In the present study observer ratings did not and Markman had not looked at relationship stability.

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